

Video-editing software

Making a movie masterpiece from your video footage is easy with the right software. Ben Pitt tests six video-editing packages for under £62 that put you in the director's chair

Video is a fantastic medium for capturing life's pivotal moments, but videotapes tend to comprise 10 per cent movie gold and 90 per cent tedium. The solution is video-editing software. Sorting, ordering and truncating video clips is at the heart of all such packages, whether they're aimed at casual home users or seasoned professionals.

Most video-editing software also lets you add effects, text, transitions (for moving from one clip to another) and overlays (to combine multiple clips simultaneously). Home-oriented packages present these features as presets, while more sophisticated software gives increased flexibility via precise, comprehensive controls. If you're just tidying up footage of a holiday or family event, these features may seem superfluous, but as your experience and ambitions grow, the ability to add corrective lighting effects and create stylish intro sequences can be a great source of satisfaction.

Video is an exciting art form. If you fancy making a sitcom or zombie slasher movie then precise editing tools can help you realise your artistic vision. The more sophisticated software here is perfect for business use, too, letting you generate animated graphics for DVDs and websites. DVD authoring is something everyone can benefit from and it's built into all the packages here.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

This *Labs* covers video-editing applications under £100, although most cost around £40 and the most expensive

is only £62. However, even at this price you should expect great things from video-editing software.

If you're taking your first steps in video editing, choose a package that focuses on ease of use. It's a priority for everyone, but particularly for those who are unfamiliar with the editing process. More ambitious users should also look out for advanced features. Keyframe editing allows you to use different settings at different points on the timeline, with the software morphing settings between these points. Ripple editing options are important, too, as these dictate if and how clips move when you alter an earlier clip on the timeline – essentially, whether they move to make or fill the space, or stay where they are.

Another area to which we've given special attention is format support. Your preferred software will be useless if it doesn't work with your video camera, or a camera you're likely to buy in the future. Video devices are slowly moving from standard definition (SD) to high definition (HD), so even if your current camera is an SD model, it's important to choose software that's well equipped for HD. Support for HDV cameras is available across all six packages reviewed, but the newer AVCHD format is less widely supported and export to HD DVD and Blu-ray discs is currently rare.

Editing video should also be fun. Some of the packages reviewed here are a joy to use, while others are the opposite. To avoid the video nasties and discover your very own movie star, read on.

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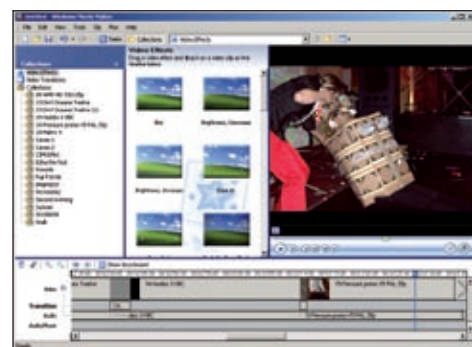
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Video-editing for free Windows Movie Maker

If you're running Windows XP or Vista, you may be surprised to learn that you have video-editing software installed. Windows Movie Maker is basic compared with the software reviewed here, but it's capable of good-looking results and is extremely easy to use. To add an effect, click Video Effects and drag a preset on to a video clip. You won't need to worry about effects settings, because there aren't any. It shouldn't take you more than 20 minutes to get to grips with every feature on offer.

Windows Movie Maker 2.1, included with Windows XP Service Pack 2, can import video from MiniDV cameras and video files in AVI, WMV, MPEG1 and MPEG2 formats, but not high-definition, QuickTime or MPEG4 formats. Widescreen isn't supported, either, so any widescreen footage is squashed into a standard aspect ratio. Export is in WMV or DV AVI format. WMV is fine for storing on your PC or uploading to YouTube, while DV AVI lets you record back to MiniDV tape or import to DVD-authoring software, but you'll have to buy this software separately if you want to create DVDs.

Windows Vista Basic and Business editions come with Windows Movie Maker 3, which adds more effects and transitions and support for video



▲ Windows' built-in video editor is easy to use

recorded in Windows Media Center. Windows Vista Home Premium and Ultimate editions come with Windows Movie Maker HD, which adds support for HDV cameras and high-definition WMV export. These operating systems include Windows DVD Maker, a straightforward DVD-authoring program.

If you want a simple way to remove the dross from home movies and add a caption or transition, Windows Movie Maker is worth trying before you splash out on one of the applications reviewed here.

ADOBE Premiere Elements 4

★★★★★

£62 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Premiere Elements 4's interface is a radical departure from those of previous versions and no longer looks much like Premiere Pro, on which it was originally based. The new layout gives more space for the preview window alongside a tabbed area that houses controls and settings in a more logical layout than before. No features have been lost, and it didn't take us long to find the locations of our favourites.

There are few new features worth getting excited about. A media manager is built into the program and accesses the same database of video, photo and audio files as Photoshop Elements. Some users will love it, but most people don't keep huge libraries of video files as they do for photos, and the browser can be unresponsive at times. A new Detect Beats function attempts to recognise the downbeat of music to help you edit video in time with the track, but it failed to make sense of the music we presented it with. Movie Themes add effects

and animated intro and end sequences to the timeline based on themes such as New Baby and Wedding Doves. Despite a polished execution, they're painfully cheesy. Non-technical users would have benefited much more from a preset library for the excellent effects.

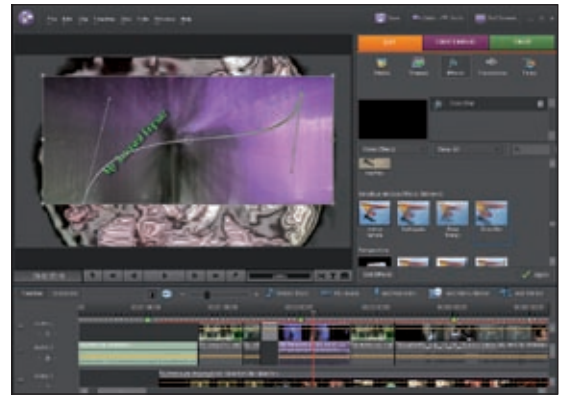
You can now animate text on a per-character basis, though the choice of preset animations is limited. The task-based Sharing Center is the best of the new features, simplifying export to a variety of destinations, including direct uploads to YouTube.

The editing tools go way beyond the competition's. Effects look fantastic and provide incredible scope for precise control, including separate keyframes for every single parameter. There are unlimited tracks for complex montages, object motion can follow curved paths, and you can even vary the speed at which objects follow these paths with incredible precision. However, there

SUMMARY

- ✓ Streamlined interface suits all abilities
- ✓ Extremely powerful editing tools
- ✗ No AVCHD support

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, 1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM (3GHz, 1GB for HD), 4.5GB disk space, DirectX 9 sound and video
DETAILS www.adobe.com/uk



▲ Premiere Elements 4's effects provide wonderful scope for precise control with unlimited tracks for complex montages

are a few weak areas, too. There aren't any ripple-editing options; the default behaviour works well in most instances, but not always. Playback stops as soon you adjust any settings, which is frustrating when trying to fine-tune time-based effects. DVD authoring is competent, albeit over-reliant on busy menu templates, and it's also possible to author Blu-ray discs complete with menus. Format support is generally excellent, but a surprising omission is AVCHD.

Everything that made version 3 impressive remains and the new interface is a big step forward. Nothing else at this price matches it for editing power, and it's catching up with Vegas Movie Studio for ease of use. It's a little pricy, but buying it with Photoshop Elements 6 for around £100 makes it a great deal.

CYBERLINK PowerDirector 6

★★★★

£48 inc VAT

From www.cyberlink.com

PowerDirector is aimed squarely at home users, with a friendly interface that lacks some of the advanced features found elsewhere. Cosmetically, it has much in common with Pinnacle Studio, with a straightforward, uncluttered layout but a preview window that's fixed at a frustratingly small size.

AVCHD support has been added since our original review (*What's New, Shopper 235*), with footage automatically converted to MPEG2 format during import. This is an effective solution to the inherent problem of AVCHD's high demands on processing power, which in other applications can result in juddering previews. However, the 17Mbit/s bit rate of the resulting MPEG2 files isn't enough to maintain the image quality of the original, particularly in fast-moving scenes. Colours weren't quite as vivid after conversion, either, and a de-interlacing filter sacrificed some of the fine detail. De-interlacing is often useful for improving playback quality on flat-panel TVs and projectors, but we would prefer to have it as an option at the

export stage rather than routinely applied during import. Overall, PowerDirector's handling of AVCHD footage is by no means a disaster, but there is room for improvement.

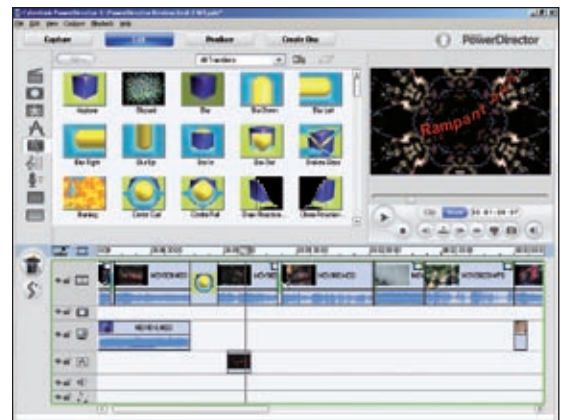
A strip of buttons along the left-hand side of the screen provides access to the usual range of effects, transitions, text and voiceover functions, and there is also a dedicated subtitle editor, a rarity at this price. Subtitles have their own track on the timeline, and are easy to format for legibility and to synchronise with the dialogue. The only disappointment is that the results are rendered as part of the video file rather than as an optional subtitle track when outputting to DVD Video.

A further set of features is grouped under a Magic prefix. Magic Movie Wizard throws together a set of edits, effects, animated graphics and music, based on a small set of cheesy templates. Magic Style and Magic Cut cover largely the same ground, but other features in the set are more useful. Magic Clean

SUMMARY

- ✓ Friendly, inviting interface
- ✓ Extensive format support
- ✗ Basic editing features

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP (SP2)/Vista, 2.2GHz processor, 512MB RAM (3GHz, 1GB for HD), 1GB disk space
DETAILS www.cyberlink.com



▲ PowerDirector's Magic Movie Wizard throws together edits, effects and animated graphics based on some cheesy templates

provides straightforward colour correction and audio noise reduction, and Magic Fix proved highly effective at minimising camera shake.

PowerDirector's bread-and-butter editing tools are underpowered. There are just two video tracks, which rules out montages as simple as two video clips side by side over a photo background. Effects are available only on the lower track, and with no keyframes their settings are static for the duration of the clip. Object motion is available only for the overlay track, although this is sophisticated, with the ability to define curved paths.

You can produce impressive results in PowerDirector, but a lack of certain key features means it might not be what you set out to create. Ultimately, it doesn't offer enough to stand out.

MAGIX

Movie Edit Pro 11 Plus

★★★

£40 inc VAT

From www.play.com

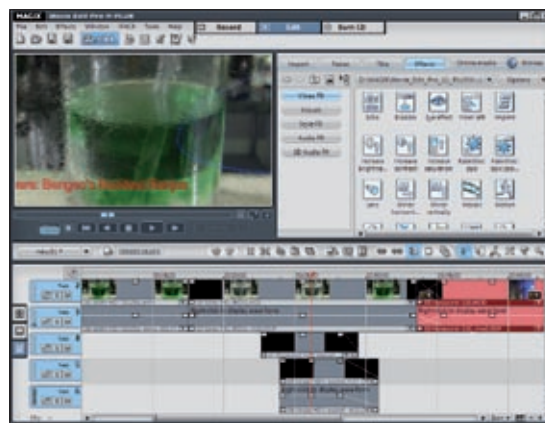
Movie Edit Pro failed to make a good first impression. The installer filled our PC with no fewer than seven separate applications, many of which we didn't want and weren't given an option to omit. When we first ran the main application, it crashed while loading. After numerous reboots, just before we were about to uninstall and reinstall, we noticed a dialog box hidden behind another one asking for the installation CD. Inserting it solved the problem.

Along with Premiere Elements, this is the only software here not to support AVCHD cameras. Even standard-definition MPEG4 clips were rejected. Attempting to export in MPEG4 format opened a webpage that requested £10 for MPEG4 activation – an additional cost not made clear in Magix's product information. We had intermittent problems importing HDV footage, too, and at one point a standard-definition MPEG2 file was rejected.

Magix stuffs software with what appears to be every feature its designers can think of. Movie Edit Pro can mix in surround

sound, schedule recordings from an analogue or Freeview TV tuner, trim out adverts automatically, add synthesizer sounds directly on to the timeline, record effects parameter changes in real time and apply mathematical transformations to the recorded data, recode dual-layer DVDs on to single-layer media, add animated graphics or abstract visualisations that dance in time with the soundtrack, burn data DVDs, edit photos, organise photo and music collections – the list is endless. Some of these features appear in ancillary programs, but many appear in the main application, which is overflowing with cryptic buttons and overblown right-click menus.

This kitchen-sink approach means there are lots of interesting features to discover, but overall it feels more exhausting than exhaustive, and mostly serves to baffle users as they struggle to find the key features they need. To make matters worse, the effects



▲ Movie Edit Pro 11 Plus has a lot of interesting elements but users will probably struggle to find the key features they need

SUMMARY

- ✓ Effective timeline controls
- ✗ Inconsistent, overstuffed interface
- ✗ Poor format support

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/2000, 700MHz processor, 500MB RAM, (2GHz, 1GB for HD), 500MB disk space
DETAILS www.magix.com/uk

are managed over no fewer than 11 different sets of controls. Some of these relate to others while some are entirely discrete, but there's little evidence of continuity between any of them. In general, editing effects is a baffling experience.

At least the core timeline editing tools are straightforward and effective. There are 32 tracks available and each one accepts any combination of media types. Handles on each object make it easy to fade it in or out and adjust its opacity or volume. A dissolve transition is automatically applied for overlapping objects, and it's easy to swap this for another transition type.

These moments of efficiency are rarities in a disorganised application. Despite the mass of features, it cannot compete with Premiere.

PINNACLE

Studio 11 Ultimate

★★★★★

£42 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

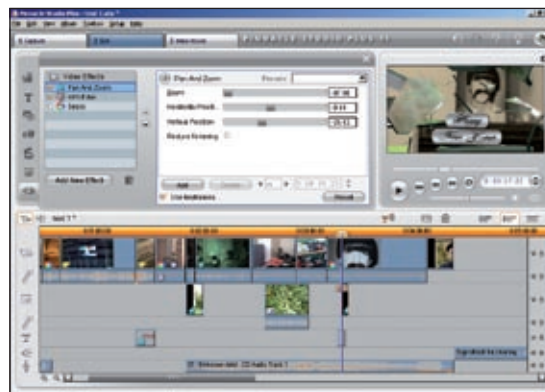
Studio 11 Ultimate sits at the top of Pinnacle's trio of Studio titles, although at Amazon's current prices it's just a few pounds more than the cheaper versions. We love that Ultimate includes a green sheet for overlaying yourself on to a newsroom, Manhattan skyline or outer space (with the help of the software's Chroma key feature). It also has a bumper collection of video and audio effects, including impressive but potentially bewildering third-party plug-ins for adding film-like qualities to video, cleaning audio and panning across photos.

The software itself is far from bewildering, though. Its interface is the cleanest-looking of all those here, and there's lots of handholding for inexperienced users. The preview window is far smaller than it needs to be, but an option tucked away in the preferences allows full-screen previews on a second monitor, keeping the editing controls available on the first. Sadly, though, adjusting any setting stops playback.

Text animation is almost non-existent, and with just two tracks for

videos, photos and text, it's the most limited of the packages here when it comes to layering visual elements. Still, effects benefit from keyframes for settings that vary over time, and many effects provide comprehensive control and polished-looking results.

AVCHD is supported, and we had no problem dropping .m2ts files captured with a Sony AVCHD camera on the timeline. Panasonic AVCHD files weren't recognised, but changing their extension from .m2t to .m2ts solved the problem. AVCHD preview quality was smooth for a single video stream on our 2.4GHz Core 2 Duo PC (which just meets the minimal requirements), and looked great in full-screen reviews, where we could appreciate the high-definition detail. However, playback practically ground to a halt when trying to fade between two AVCHD clips. A background rendering function uses idle processor time to produce temporary files for smoother previews, but we found it rarely kept up with our work rate.



▲ Studio 11 Ultimate's effects benefit from keyframes for settings that vary, and many provide comprehensive control

SUMMARY

- ✓ Beginner-friendly interface
- ✓ Lots of impressive effects
- ✗ Relatively limited format support

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM (Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 1.5GB RAM, 256MB graphics card for HD), 5GB disk space
DETAILS www.pinnacle.co.uk

Support for other file types is disappointing. HDV cameras are supported, but we were unable to import HDV files saved with the widely used .m2t extension (renaming them didn't work). This is the only software here not to support QuickTime, ruling out videos from a lot of digital stills cameras. Photoshop PSD files weren't recognised either, but the software did accept TIFs with transparency, so images with irregular shapes could be overlaid on top of video. DVD authoring is well catered for, and high-definition footage can be burnt to HD DVD without menus – or it will be when HD DVD writers are available.

Studio has its drawbacks, but it's one of the easiest packages for inexperienced users to grasp. Vegas Movie Studio and Premiere Elements shouldn't seem intimidating, but if they do then Studio is a respectable alternative.

SONY

Vegas Movie Studio Platinum 8

★★★★★

£55 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Vegas Movie Studio hasn't changed much in recent years, but it's still a breath of fresh air compared with most low-cost editors. Its streamlined set of tools ensures a shallow learning curve and swift operation without compromising editing power and precision. It also offers excellent preview performance and fast timeline navigation, with comprehensive options to balance preview detail against frame rates when using complex effects.

If you have two monitors you can now use one for full-screen previews, which is ideal for HD editing. Meanwhile, new colour-coded snapping options make it easier than ever to arrange clips on the timeline.

The basic version of Vegas Movie Studio (£45 including VAT) only handles standard-definition video, but the Platinum version supports HDV and AVCHD high-definition cameras, and JVC's proprietary GZ-HD7. HDV preview performance is much improved, and is easily manipulated on a

fast PC. AVCHD is hard work for even the fastest PCs, but Vegas handles it better than any other software we've tested. It also came top for video file support, importing everything from 3GP files from mobile phones to .vob files from DVDs. The Platinum version adds basic support for 5.1 surround with Dolby Digital export, an advanced colour-correction effect and export to iPod and PSP, making it worth the extra £10 even if you don't need HD support.

Both versions are way above the competition for DVD authoring, handled by a separate application called DVD Architect Studio 4.5. This hasn't advanced much beyond the previous

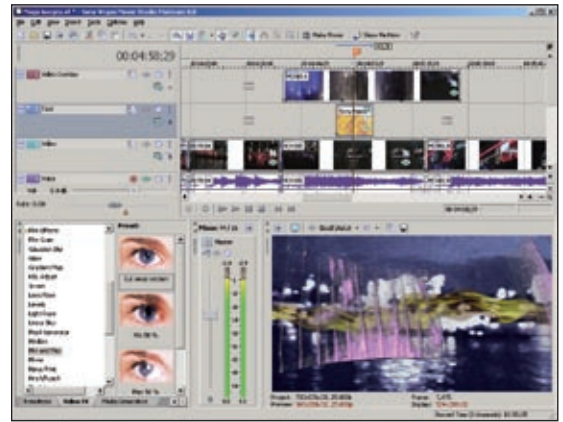
version but its friendly interface, with open-ended menu design and advanced control over disc navigation, makes it worth the £55 price on its own.

Vegas Movie Studio is a joy to use. It doesn't include any zero-effort automatic editing functions, but its

SUMMARY

- ✓ Powerful editing and authoring tools
- ✓ Comprehensive format support
- ✗ Limited to four video tracks

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM (2.8GHz, 512MB for HD), 200MB disk space
DETAILS www.sonycreativesoftware.com



▲ Vegas Movie Studio Platinum 8's streamlined and responsive interface caters very well for beginners

streamlined, responsive interface caters well for beginners. Serious editing power is on tap, and the swiftness of operation means complex edits are often attainable. However, demanding users may be frustrated by the maximum of four video tracks. Complex video montages are only possible by rendering subsections to a single file and re-importing them.

The object motion controls are clumsy compared with those in Premiere Elements, so Elements is a better choice for ambitious users. Still, if AVCHD editing, advanced DVD authoring or dual-monitor support are important, Vegas Movie Studio Platinum is the obvious choice. Despite improvements to Premiere Elements' interface, Vegas remains the easiest to use, too.

ULEAD

VideoStudio 11.5 Plus

★★★★★

£38 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

VideoStudio Plus couldn't be accused of lagging behind the competition in terms of features. This version offers comprehensive digital video camera support, including DV, DVD, HDV, AVCHD and JVC's proprietary GZ-HD7. Export is just as impressive, with direct uploads to YouTube and presets for iPod, PSP, Smartphone and AVCHD format on DVD media. The latter will play in Blu-ray players and PlayStation 3 consoles, making it an excellent choice for high-definition home video playback in the living room without requiring a Blu-ray writer drive.

The downside of AVCHD on DVD media is a lack of menus and a 40-minute capacity, but VideoStudio Plus can get around both of these limitations with its support for HD DVD and Blu-ray discs. These use the same menu-design facilities as for DVD authoring, with elegant menu templates and impressive scope for customisation in a friendly, wizard-based interface. This is way ahead of the competition; Adobe Premiere Elements includes

Blu-ray authoring and Pinnacle Studio can create menu-less HD DVD discs, but VideoStudio is the first software we have seen at any price that supports both formats. HD DVD writers are yet to materialise, but Blu-ray writers are currently available from around £250, so VideoStudio's support for this format is perfectly timed.

Version 11.5 improves on the AVCHD support added in version 11. You can now import Sony AVCHD cameras' files from the PC's hard disk as well as directly from the camera. AVCHD preview performance remains poor, though, struggling to play a single stream on a Core 2

Duo E6600-based PC, so it's virtually impossible to work directly with this processor-intensive format. A Smart Proxy feature converts files into less-demanding formats for editing, returning to the originals for the final render.

Up to seven video tracks are available for complex video montages, and effects settings can be varied over

SUMMARY

- ✓ High-definition disc authoring
- ✓ Lots of features at a competitive price
- ✗ Effects are crude and hard to edit

VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 512MB RAM (1GB recommended), 1GB disk space. HDV editing requires 3GHz Pentium 4, 1GB RAM (2GB recommended), PCI-E x16 graphics card
DETAILS www.ulead.co.uk



▲ VideoStudio provides up to seven video tracks for montages, and effects settings can be varied with multiple keyframes

time using multiple keyframes. However, doing so is fiddly. The pop-up editor is cramped and shows only a single effect rather than any combinations of effects or other video layers.

The effects themselves don't look as classy as those in the best software here. Most are of the zany special effect variety, and the colour-correction effects produce crude, blocky colours at extreme settings. In VideoStudio, controls for a video clip disappear from view as soon as you adjust the timeline position. As a result, it can be slow and cumbersome to use, and isn't suitable for creative film-makers.

Even so, if you want to get high-definition footage on optical discs, it's the obvious choice. At this price, ambitious users could consider buying it purely for this purpose alongside a more capable package for editing. **CB**